

Indoor Language

Prologue

(Rotterdam, interior of an artist's studio. Crisp late autumn light floods through large windows as the two male protagonists sit on low chairs at an unusually high table. The sound of children playing filters in from outside.)

Barnaby Drabble: Shall we start?

Hinrich Sachs: Well... you made a list *(pointing to a piece of paper on the table in front of BD)*

BD: Should we introduce Drabble+Sachs?

HS: Like the way we are positioning our production in cultural hierarchies?

BD: *(he looks at the piece of paper)* Come to think of it there's a lot on this list, I'm not sure if we will get through it?

HS: Let's talk about the art world as a restricted model of cultural practice and other models...

BD: Ah, the teamwork thing...

HS: *(he takes the list and reads)* This is going to take days to discuss: art in relation to business, and in relation to activism...

BD: *(has walked round to peer over HS's shoulder)* Well we could just go straight to point G. about working with the public. Or maybe we should just start talking and we will come up with something we haven't anticipated?

(They leave)

Scene 1

(The two protagonists return carrying a lower, more practical table which they place next to the other shifting the chairs and resettling)

BD: *(turning to face the audience)* Let me begin by mentioning, that although we have an art background we are now placing our collaborative practice within a broader cultural sphere, a space where art-production can only be understood in a networked relation to other forms of cultural production. In spite of the arguments of post-modernity, there is still a sense in which art claims separate intellectual high-ground, perhaps due to its continued attachment of value to the historical construct of autonomy, and also to its perceived indirect relationship to market. We observe that this creates a division between art production and 'the rest', and we believe that this "us and them" schism is unhelpful.

HS: One of the reasons we came together to develop a collaborative practice with a long-term perspective is to overcome certain types of limitations, set frameworks and roles. The dominant reason to explore these was precisely to keep open a space for communication with other contemporary discourses, which I was finding professionally important but hard to effect from within the role of the individual artist. A lot of the assumptions which are held sacred within the art-world seem to become very problematic when applied to culture as a whole. (*Outside a dog starts barking*)

BD: As a curator and a writer I was aware that I was developing tools that had the potential for a very broad application, beyond the limited use the art-world has for them. There were times when to deliver a project I pulled together people with broad skills: artists, curators, writers, educationalists or designers for example, and the unspoken rule that the artist was the only person in the room with the remit to be creative, seemed to me to be bizarre. To suggest that this is always the case is a generalisation, but this division of roles does exist and seems to be self-restrictive and divisive. This is why I moved to collaborating with some very particular like-minded artists, who were interested in shared development of content, not purely the mediation of their individual practices.

HS: We should remember that the clear division of roles within the art-world can be linked to a post-Fordian understanding of working hierarchiesⁱ within a society of spreading corporatism. In this identification the artists exist at the very lowest level of the production chain, the two things that make their art product consumable or accessible are their passing through the control of on the one hand the dealer or curator and on the other the critic. In contrast, we are deliberately looking at both production and agency at the same time. We start by pulling together a wide constellation of different partners for our specific projects. For each project this constellation differs, but the projects tend to stem from a thematic interest and are conditioned by how our actions develop meaning in relation to this issue.

BD: You use two terms here. I am always cautious about using the word theme, because in a discussion of curatorial practice the word is most often used in the term *theme exhibition*. I prefer issue because it has a relation to politics, you reflect on a theme, you act on an issue. It also brings to mind a conversation I had with Asier Perez Gonzalezⁱⁱ. He noted that the critical shift in relation to artists had changed from one of media to theme. Previously the question was always what do you make? paintings or sculptures?, and now everyone is asking, so what's your theme? His reasoning was that both these questions identify art without relation to its meaning, objectifying and neutralizing its importance. Using the term issue instead of theme better suggests that we are primarily interested in acting on a particular problem. (*several dogs have joined the first outside and they form a wild chorus in the background*)

HS: Ok, but we do have two agendas, we have the issues, but on the other hand we have a structural agenda, which generates content too. The operational field: organisation, timing, financing etcetera, which follows on from identification of the issue is identified as a productive element, it becomes an active agent of the meaning making process.

BD: In relation to this come the processes of brainstorming, work-shopping or research. In his introduction to the recently published collection of essays and interviews "The Academy and the Corporate Public" Stephan Dilleuthⁱⁱⁱ questions the idea of research and comes up with another term, (*he lifts the book from the table and turns its pages*). 'Investigation' is the word he uses, which seems to have a more active and driven connotation.

HS: (*laughs*) That's a term that was apparently brought into the art-world by Joseph Kosuth. In the first series of his works figure the "First" to the "Tenth Investigation"...

Scene 2

(The two protagonists are sitting in the Café Rembrandt an Asian-run fast food restaurant where they periodically dip fries into a pool of Mayonnaise, Ketchup and Peanut butter, a mixture called "Oorlog" (war) sauce in Dutch. Teenagers and other clients come in, dogs and their owners stroll past the window, barking and birdsong can be heard in the background)

HS: In our individual practices over the last few years already and at present with our office Drabble+Sachs we develop projects with publics that stretch beyond those traditionally involved in contemporary art. Regarding the question of the public I observe two different perspectives. In the common artist's logic there is truthfully not much interest in reflecting one's relation to the public. Satisfaction is reached when the artwork is produced, on show, and at best reviewed by an art critic. Response from a wider public and the broader cultural discourse is rarely considered. A different approach would be the communication logic used within commercial organisations and public service where response and evaluation are absolutely crucial. Because without a knowledge of the public, exchange fails.

BD: Yeah, *(he pauses to light a cigarette)* some would say that this distinction is an old one and one that the development of process-based work from the 70's to the 90's addressed. But I believe there is a further division in logics of those artists who are concerned about involving specific publics in the making of work, and this is centred on the problematic of a practice that claims a non-art audience but is uninterested in radicalizing its relation to the art-world and associated market. We can see clearly that for particular businesses the public are their client, and the client commandeers respect. Some artists go out from the safe haven of art into the 'real world' where they gather content with the help of the public, but their client-base is a very specific art world crowd, who get to see this material fashioned into a finished work at a later date. In these practices the public are not clients but simply unpaid volunteers. This practice could be critiqued as the exoticism of the public as 'the other' seen from within the initiated art-world. Of course it's clear that we are involved in the history of those so called involved or expanded practices that developed in the 90's, but I would like to think we can differentiate ourselves from this approach by identifying the public who produce the meaning of the work as the most important public, our most treasured clients if you like.

HS: I would like to summarise this relation to the public. On the one side we take care of our content concerns, issues about the contemporary city as production machine, options for cultural change, questions of ownership and development, aspects that we have been continually discussing over the last year. But on the level of projects we always focus on how best to connect and relate these ideas to an identified public and context. We aim to come up with a clear idea of what can we expect from the given public, interlocutor or situation and what can and do we want to communicate. Such work is not focussing on material production, but on claiming space on immaterial and material levels. Such communication may be reshaped by the individuals involved throughout the process and becomes negotiation, "a public" has become interlocutor and/or participant. Negotiation in this sense links to what I was mentioning earlier. This is what we did at Anna Best's Team Build conference^{iv}, for Gavin Wade's STRIKE exhibition^v and very much for the TMguerilla^{vi} presentation against the themeparkesque backdrop of the Swiss National Exhibition.

(BD looks for an ashtray)

Scene 3

(Back in the studio, BD and HS drink coffee and tea in an attempt to remove the taste of oorlog sauce)

BD: Does building teams to deliver projects affect our identity? In the broader cultural sphere we become known as a company, defined by our approach and focus on 'cultural research and action'. With this expansion and shift in identity do we risk losing control over what we produce, or losing the valuable autonomy we can command as authors?

HS: A model proposed by the way in which architects work could be helpful here. In such a practice a contract defines the degree of detailing to which the architect involves themselves. Necessarily the architect is the author of the finished building, but they may not define the designs down to the doors or doorknobs. There are zones where the artistic autonomy, or in this case the authorial voice of the architect is relatively and deliberately unimportant, it's outsourced. There is control of the overall idea but not down to every last brick. Such a model suggests that the artistic logic of handling every tiny detail is not the only valid one. In other words: autonomy can be proportional without loss of authorship.

BD: We discussed Rem Koolhaas^{vii} and his architecture firm for including those working on production and those working on discourse about production. Due to this kind of framework such an office is as much recognized for the debates they are involved in, as they are for the things they build.

HS: Production, agency and critical discourse being worked on in parallel stand in stark opposition to the very long-standing idea, that the artist should keep to a material and by this I mean 'material' material, language as material, or image as material, working autonomously and transforming it into art while remaining absolutely distant to other forms of societal development, for example economic or political developments.

BD: I suspect that some of our public here will be appalled to see that we debunk this traditional, but for many functioning model...

HS: It's a question of safety or risk.

BD: ...because in the process we are embracing a new working structure that looks suspiciously like a marketing or PR model. I know I am coming back to this, but by changing our model are we really willing to throw the baby out with the bath water?

HS: I think you formulated an answer to this almost perfectly on the phone directly after the Diamond 2002 conference in Aarhus^{viii}, Denmark when you mentioned the high percentage of what you called 'middlemen' present at the conference. Those agency's for creativity, or 'arts and business' style schemes which come exactly from the background of PR and Marketing. Here we can draw a line and clearly show a difference in logic, and this is to claim even within an operational or organisational logic, the authorship. To come up with the ideas, present them and take responsibility for the meaning they produce.

BD: The 'middlemen' I referred to seemed already to be slightly ahead of the game, recognizing that there is a craving for this stuff called 'creativity' within the business sector, but that business knows very little about how to inject it, they step in to help. Business of course does not differentiate between offering employees breathing exercises and yoga in their lunch break, taking an artist in residence onto their staff, or making time for group hugs and away weekends paint-balling, its all fun and its all creative! The middlemen recognize this and capitalize on it, they speak the right language to operate in this business context. They are smiley, warm professionals with a portfolio of artists and a menu of

proven examples of successful artistic activities which they can provide for the business client. Of course the artists hired to provide this are left to benefit from a financial trickle down effect, neither state nor commerce want to deal directly with them, and they don't have to. As companies the middlemen have the financial structure to manage larger projects and they are accountable for the spend from the states point of view. The logic of the artists agenda in this constellation is not debated at all, neither is any concept of moral, social or political urgency within art practice.

Scene 4

(The two protagonists sit facing one another on a train leaving Rotterdam, its nearly dark outside. The train fills with people and the outline of a large mosque passes the window behind them as the train pulls out)

HS: Earlier today you suggested that we might stumble across an issue not yet thought of. Here we are. The activities of 'middlemen' bring up the topic of language! What are the differences between professional languages?, and what do these differences mean for cultural production?. Recently I was talking about this with the artist Carey Young^x, who simultaneously works in the business sector and is an outspoken supporter of carrying several different business cards. She speaks precisely this language which business responds to. Just as this is a definable code, we can recognize a professional language used by artists, one which is notably not business compatible. Clearly between this and the language of business and politics there is a gap to bridge. In a situation where artists prefer not to bridge this gap we can see exactly why it is comfortable for the one side to be happy with these 'middlemen' who move between both kinds of language. Of course the places where such artistic discourse is bred are the academy and the exhibiting institutions, and the academic approach reinforces codes of reflexivity and subjectivity amongst others. But to my mind it does not recognize the gap.

BD: This might be tied to the traditional idea that artists work with the visual. And in my experience there is a subconscious political and formal reaction in art education against the teaching students to reflect on modes of speaking at all.

HS: Carey also expressed the opinion that art-students are not expected or required to be able to describe their work and at the same time boiled it down by ironically stating that to be successful in today's world artists should be able to communicate their idea in three sentences in the style of a press release. At the same time my observations differ in so far as over the last ten or so years there has been the already mentioned strong drive for competence in building discourse around the work in art education. Its something like when you have these group critiques at art college, where art students meet curators, critics and artists and everybody shares what you might call 'indoor language'.

BD: I love this term, it suggests this idea which is developed with a 'group crit'. That nothing should go beyond the room. The reason that this is suggested is that talking about the work must not be mistaken for the work itself, and this is why it's a bit 'indoor'. From the outside it has to seem as if the work just came into some kind of visual existence.

HS: Dropped from the skies!

BD: Exactly, there seems to be a case for keeping all this language indoors in order to deny later that it ever existed.

HS: Now you are talking!

BD: This is reinforced by an anecdote I overheard in the office of a commercial gallery. The gallerist, expecting a visit from a collector said to the artist, 'don't talk too much about the work, let them suggest what it means'.

HS: There we are. It is basically talking. 'Indoor language' is most often shared orally. Its mirroring appearances are the review or the essay. But let's have a look at formats of other professional languages: Minutes of meetings for example or legal letters, contracts, press releases, feasibility studies and annual reports...

BD: Identifying how 'indoor language' does and does not work is useful. I couldn't say for example that the few 'group crits' I have sat in on were 'meetings' in the business sense of the word. These were not the arena of negotiation, and the participants did not come to them with concrete aims or agendas. Equally the worth of these meetings is defined by each individual's use of the reflections brought up within their own practice, those present do not resemble parties or constituencies of opinion within these gatherings. The languages of business and politics are directional not reflective and encode power, just as they suggest the trading of ideas not the simple production of them. In relation to this I would like to correlate this interest in language with the concept of necessity. There is no way to come back to an understanding of what is needed unless you are continually involved in discussion with other discourses, a job that involves learning new languages. Necessity does not appear as if by magic, and you can't sit in a closed room and realistically assess what needs to be done. In today's cultural field negotiation with partners seems to be key to a development of a kind of urgency around work, recognizing shared concerns identifies and amplifies this feeling of necessity.

HS: This lends us an argument for a specific positioning of the negotiation process in cultural practice. We get in contact at a very early stage with potential partners, and this differs from the conventional practice where the contact between artist and whoever else comes in very late, once all kinds of negotiations having already taken place. To explain the conventional logic I could take as an example the discourse of city planning, linked as it is to political and economical agendas, which amongst other things frame the discourses of contemporary art, music and theatre. It identifies a respective institution (a museum, concert hall and a theatre) which then takes care of the arts scene. Within this scene are curators and they take care of the artists. With this logic artistic production comes really late. What we propose is to shift or reposition the moment of production, which we have identified as inseparable from negotiation, and this needs to be done at the primary source of discourse.

BD: This is a proposal for seeking out short-cuts across well established cultural hierarchies. You might see the tradition of institutional critique as a source of this kind of logic. The practices of those artists who started to critique Museum collections by linking the objects on display to the philosophies still being unconsciously propagated by the management, can be understood as forcing precisely this kind of hierarchical displacement, they were acting beyond their expected function if you like. It's clear to me that this form of work has been consummately explored by artists in relation to the art museum and more recently also the historical or ethnographical collections, producing some interesting forms and reactions. But I have started to look more broadly, particularly in relation to the presentation of TMguerilla, and see that where 'capitalism' itself can be seen as the institution, the key protagonists attempting to short-cut hierarchies are not artists at all, but activists. Their actions drawing the big lines between the public images of the multi-national corporations and the miserable existence of their developing world employees for example can be seen to have strong parallels to the tradition of institutional critique...

(The drinks trolley passes down the carriage, the two protagonists order cans of beer as the train filled with people rolls on into the night)

ⁱ This idea is more fully discussed and illustrated by Hans Christian Dany, „You can call it Luxury“, in: Democratic Design, Casco Issues No. 7, Utrecht 2001 as well as by Sabeth Buchmann, „Im Aussen der Ingroup-Struktur“. In: Ökonomien der Zeit, Cologne 2002

ⁱⁱ Asier Perez Gonzalez organized the workshop „Powerpoint Revolucìon“ at Arteleku, San Sebastian, in September 2000. Barnaby Drabble was a workshop participant and Hinrich Sachs was an invited speaker.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephan Dillemoth: „The Academy and the Corporate Public“, Bergen/Cologne 2002

^{iv} Team Build, a conference organized by Anna Best at the Baltic visitors center, Gateshead in October 2001

^v the exhibition STRIKE, curated by Gavin Wade, adjusted by Liam Gillick took place at Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 2002. A publication under the same title was produced on the occasion. For the full discussion about production and ownership of cultural material with the curator see

www.drabblesachs.org

^{vi} TMguerilla, a changing presentation of material from artists and activists. Organized by Drabble+Sachs for the AMJ/Swiss National exhibition on the lakesides in Biel, Neuchâtel, Yverdon and Murten in May/June 2002. See www.drabblesachs.org

^{vii} Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Lars Spuybroek: „Africa Comes First“, in: Transurbanism, Rotterdam 2002

^{viii} Diamond 2002, a conference organized by the arts and business networking organization NyX and the research institute Learning Lab Denmark in Aarhus, September 2002.

^{ix} Carey Young was an invited speaker at „Individual Speed in the Information Society“, a day of presentations and discussion at Zaal de Unie, Rotterdam, in November 2002, organized by Hinrich Sachs, produced by the Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam.

Hinrich Sachs and Barnaby Drabble, November 2002.

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